

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 11-23

NEW YORK TIMES
13 MARCH 1977

A TV President?

By Tom Wicker

How can President Carter be so adept at managing the symbols and images he wants for his Administration—the walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, the downhome atmosphere, the telephone call-in—and yet be so inept at establishing a decent working relationship with an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress?

Maybe the trouble will be corrected —“The road can be smooth, or the road can be rough,” Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd says, only half-threateningly—but so far there’s at least some reason to wonder whether Mr. Carter won’t end up as the first President to try to govern more by television and public appeal than by political give and take.

It was entirely predictable, for example, that Congress would react sharply against Mr. Carter’s decision to drop 19 Congressionally approved water projects from the Federal budget. Now the Senate has voted by nearly 3-to-1 to prevent such action. Not only had the President failed to consult with most of the members of Congress affected before making his decision, apparently his Congressional aides had been lax at best even in informing members that the water projects were being held up. But such projects, particularly in the Western states, are regarded as very nearly sacred. Mr. Carter’s executive decision to excise the 19 from the budget, moreover, was all too reminiscent of the “impoundment” of Congressionally approved appropriations in which Richard Nixon used to specialize.

For a President in office less than two months, Mr. Carter has suffered more major rebuffs than would normally be expected from a Congress easily controlled by his own party. Senate opposition forced the withdrawal of the President’s first nominee as Director of Central Intelligence, Theodore C. Sorensen. Despite Mr. Carter’s powerful news conference appeal for support of Paul Warnke as evidence of the Senate’s confidence “in my own ability as chief negotiator” of arms limitation agreements, Mr. Warnke scraped through by only 58 to 40. On the House side, the Ways and Means Committee brushed aside important elements of the Carter economic stimulus plan and substituted its dubious proposal for an employment tax credit.

One reason for this state of affairs, of course, is that in the wake of its battles with Mr. Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, Congress is newly assertive of its independence and prerogatives—and better equipped, through reformed rules and the new budget committees, to operate as something other than a

Mr. Byrd and Speaker Tip O’Neill in the House seem more defensive about supposed Presidential slights than more experienced and settled leaders might be.

Congress was Democratic, moreover, before Mr. Carter arrived in Washington; he did not carry its members into office on his coattails, and many ran far ahead of him in their states and districts last fall. That may be one reason why the newly elected Daniel P. Moynihan, already suspect among New York Democrats for service to two Republican Presidents, voted last week against a Democratic President and Mr. Warnke.

Every day that passes also seems to show that the President and his closest aides really are outsiders, unfamiliar with the arcane ways of Washington. Frank Moore, the Congressional liaison chief, conceded during the water projects flap that he had not thought it necessary to give members of Congress advance notice of budget deletions that affected their constituencies. And Mr. Carter himself was probably right but was certainly impolitic to tell his news conference on the day of the Warnke vote that most of those opposing his nominee were really opposed to arms reduction itself; given Congressional sensitivities, the accusation was bound to harden the anti-Warnke vote.

Mr. Carter has shown some conciliatory impulse. For example, after Mr.

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Sorenson’s withdrawal, the President nominated a man almost certain to be acceptable as the C.I.A. director — Admiral Stansfield Turner.

Still, Mr. Carter’s obvious fondness for and success at managing his relations with the general public, as opposed to his relative failure with Congress, may be significant. He was known in Georgia for appealing to the public over the heads of legislators who tried to block his programs—and the ability of any President to use his office and prestige for such appeals in the television era is not only greater than any governor’s, but has not really been measured.

John Kennedy was fearful that he would wear out his welcome if he appeared too often on television; but his frequent news conferences were powerful instruments of his appeal. Lyndon Johnson relied on his mastery of Congressional relations. Richard Nixon tried to go over the heads of Congress and the press, but except on the emotional issue of Vietnam had little personal appeal on television. Neither did Gerald Ford. So far, at least, Jimmy Carter looks better able and more willing than any of them to mobilize the public as a force in managing the